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From the Author

on the British Fisheries

A

L E T T E R

TO THE

COURT OF DIRECTORS,

OF THE

S O C I E T Y,

FOR IMPROVING THE

BRITISH FISHERIES.

WITH A

P L A N

FOR THE ERECTION OF

V I L L A G E S,

HUMBLY SUBMITTED TO THEIR CONSIDERATION.

Nor look on
Shamefully passive, while Batavian fleets
Defraud us of the glittering finny swarms,
That heave our friths, and crowd upon our shores
THOMSON'S SEASONS.

PRINTED FOR T. CADELL, IN THE STRAND.

M. DCC. LXXXVII.

THE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
OF
LONDON
FOR THE
PROMOTION OF
HISTORICAL RESEARCH



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M. D. B. L.

ADVERTISEMENT,

THE author is sensible how inferior this Letter is to the dignity and importance of the subject, and even to what it might have been, had a little more time been allowed for it's composition. But fearing, that some plan might soon be adopted, he has ventured to present it such as it is; and he hopes that the Directors will receive, with indulgence, his endeavours to be useful, and excuse those defects which arise from inexperience in writing.

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE author is sensible how inferior this letter is to the dignity and importance of the subject, and even to what it might have been, had a more mature time been allowed for its composition. But fearing that some might be so disposed, he has ventured to present it to the public; and he hopes that the public will receive, with indulgence, his endeavours to be useful, and excuse those defects which arise from imperfect execution.

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A
L E T T E R

TO THE

COURT OF DIRECTORS, &c.

AS you have most judiciously resolved not to come to any determination with respect to the improvement of the British Fisheries till you have obtained a most accurate knowledge of the most effectual means of fulfilling the purposes of your laudable institution, and have been pleased publickly to proclaim that you would listen to any information that was sent you, I shall

B. embrace

embrace the opportunity you have offered me, and, with as much brevity as possible, submit to your consideration my sentiments upon the subject.

The western coast of Scotland, to which I understand you are first to turn your talents and attention, is by nature destined for Fisheries. The sea is indented by a vast number of arms and islands, forming an extensive line of coast, with a number of bays, salt-water navigable lakes, and excellent harbours. The sea abounds every where with inexhaustible treasures of fish. Nor has nature been less liberal with regard to the fertility of the soil. Though the country is little improved, and the husbandry under the worst of management, yet, there is lime and sea wreck at hand for manure ; and
you

you may discover the cultivated part of the land and pasture to be very luxuriant. The island of Lismore particularly, and a few other islands, in point of richness of soil, are inferior to none that have come within my observation in Britain. Nor is this country less indebted to the indulgence of nature for placing peat mosses very contiguous to the coast, whence the inhabitants are plentifully supplied with fuel; a conveniency which few parts of the Highlands can boast of, they being obliged in most places to bring their peats from near the tops of the hills, at about the distance of three or more miles from their habitations. There is one farther advantage, which I must not overlook, arising from the favourable local situation of the coast; and that is, the proximity of it to Ireland; from

which, in years of scarcity, when the crops of the country fail, is imported a large quantity of meal at a very reasonable price. Nor must I forget the utility which the Carron Canal, in all probability, when finished, will render to the Fisheries, and to the inhabitants in general on this coast, by opening an easy passage and ready access to the Lowlands, which may be the means of introducing a profitable traffick between the two countries. The vessels that transport the fish, can return back freighted with meal or grain, which commodities of life the Western inhabitants have always been impelled by necessity to bring from the Eastern coast. The benefit alone of the whole country being able to procure fish by an easy carriage, will be consequential; because at present the people
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of the internal parts of Scotland hold the herrings in such estimation, that you may see them go with small inconvenient one-horse carts, sometimes eighty miles from their houses, to the nearest sea ports, to fetch a sufficient quantity of herrings to serve them the whole winter. These when mixed with their potatoes, make an excellent and very nourishing food for them. I must, however, confess that the climate is in general rainy, particularly the Autumn season : but to make amends for this, the Winter is extremely mild, the snow lies no time on the ground, and the cattle require little or no fodder, as they feed upon grass and sea weed all the year round. From these great and uncommon advantages, I hope you will not think it presumption in me if I pronounce that it must appear to any intelligent and reflecting mind, that

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no country can be better calculated for carrying on extensive Fisheries, and maintaining many thousands of fishermen than this is; and that it has been owing to the poverty, indolence, and prejudices of its inhabitants, that they have not long ago profited of the valuable gifts which Providence ever held out to them with a bountiful hand.

I shall now, with your permission, call your attention to the most important object of all, the establishment of villages upon the sea coast. As it cannot be supposed that persons of your rank in life have paid much attention to the properest method of building of them; in order that you may be enabled to form an easier judgment upon the matter, I shall endeavour to throw some light upon it, by discussing, in few words, the two plans already
ready

ready laid before you, and then I shall beg leave to propose a third.

The first plan is for the Society immediately to set about building villages upon a very expensive scale, each house to cost twenty-five pounds, and to buy boats, nets, &c. for the fishermen. This is no new idea. Every Joint Stock Company in this country as well as in Holland, who attempted the improvement of the Fisheries, did adopt nearly the same scheme; and the result was their ruin. Their houses were deserted; the boats and nets were either destroyed or sold for little or nothing: their capital sunk, and never recovered. These unfortunate circumstances will, beyond doubt, induce you to be cautious of following a system which has broken a capital of 500,000*l.* and has repeatedly proved fatal to others of less value. These
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precedents should excite you to search out for a more perfect plan.

The second proposes the feuing out of land. This, though not liable as the former, to the frauds and impositions of agents and contractors, will still meet with opposition. When innovations are introduced into a country, it is necessary to look into the human mind, to enquire how new measures may operate upon it. The Highlanders are, at present, very humble and submissive to their superiors, and habituated to serve their master, who has great influence over them. As sudden changes are always dangerous, is it not to be dreaded that, by at once freeing them from the dependance which from their childhood they have been accustomed to, you may render them, instead of the sober, frugal, and industrious fishermen
you

you wish, a most turbulent, litigious, haughty, dissipated race of people, styling themselves free burgessees? In the arduous task in which you have so nobly embarked, you have many difficulties to encounter; and among others the prejudices of the people to combat; as without their seconding your efforts, little can be expected from the best digested plan. Before, therefore, you come to any design, you will find it requisite to humour their dispositions, and to consult their temper and genius. It is observed, in that mountainous county, where meal is so scarce, that every one, from the earliest period of his youth, looks up with pleasure to the maintenance of a cow, and the having a small garden, with a little piece of land for sowing corn, lint, and planting potatoes. These privileges he considers

as the greatest comfort in life, and anxiously hopes one day or other to possess and enjoy them. It is from this character of the nation, that I mean to found the permanent and solid basis of a plan. Offer them a little land, and you will see them from all quarters repairing to enlist under your banners. But to put this into execution you must first have property. This leads me to my proposal, which is, That the Society shall immediately purchase a large tract of land, consisting of four hundred Scotch acres of arable, meadow, and pasture land, and nearly fourteen hundred acres of moor, to establish a village upon, which shall contain a hundred families. This should serve as a model to all the rest of the villages that may afterwards be built. The Society should pay for it the medium price

price of land as it sells now in Scotland, being about twenty-five years purchase of the yearly nett rent, free of all deductions; which rent should be ascertained, agreeably to the yearly value of the land, by trial before the Sheriff, or otherwise, as you shall direct. You are to divide the four hundred acres into one hundred shares, every man to have his lot of four acres compact and together, in order that it may stimulate him to inclose and reclaim every piece of waste ground that falls to his share. You are then to let these grounds upon building leases of twenty-one years, with these conditions stipulated in them: that the tenants are to build sufficient houses, to be of the same heighth and breadth, and to follow a regular plan; and that they are to be fishermen, and to pursue no other trade, a very few per-

sons excepted, who must be trades-people, to provide the fishermen with the different articles they stand in need of. Each villager should be allowed a cow : a horse should be allowed among four of them, to till their crofts, and to lead home their fuel. These cattle should feed on the moor in common. The fourteen hundred acres would yield abundance of pasture to maintain the one hundred cows and twenty-five horses allotted them. Such a farm as this is, may let for 150*l.* yearly rent ; which rent the villagers are to pay equally amongst them ; though it is a fact in the Highlands, that if a proprietor divides a farm among trades-people, he is sure of getting a higher rent for it. I am for having such houses built as are common in the Highlands only, with the improvement

provement of covering the walls with lime, to make them more solid, which may occasion a difference of between two or three pounds in the price. Such houses as these can be built by the people themselves, at from ten to twelve pounds. The Society could not build them under twenty. I have not included slated roofs, though slates are convenient; yet timber is so dear, that the people could not afford to roof the houses with slates.

I do not claim the merit of discovering this plan. I have learned it from perceiving the conduct of several spirited proprietors on the Western coast, who have adopted it from a confidence of the efficacy of the measure, and of the benefit it will turn out to them, by promoting the improvement of their land,

land, and the extension of the fisheries. The consequences that will flow from this plan, limited as I have made it, are manifest, and so open to every mind, that it is needless for me to mention them: I shall only take notice of a few of its advantages. The difference arising from the security of land in Scotland, is every day increasing in value; whilst, from the time a house is built, it is every day decreasing. The interest you would receive, being four *per cent.* and, when the leases fall in, seven or eight, would encourage people to bring forward their subscriptions, and you would not be troubled with the speculation and abuses of agents and contractors. The first plan would return one *per cent.* upon a bad security, as five shillings would be the most you could get in that country for a single house,

house. The second plan of sowing of land, would return you four *per cent*, but then the interest would never increase; and by your rendering the tenants quite free and independent, they would be under nobody's controul, and would fish, smuggle, or be idle, as pleased them the best.

I must however expect, notwithstanding the preference of the third plan over the rest, that objections will be made to it: these I am prepared to answer. The first objection, will be the difficulty of finding people to agree to the conditions which I have suggested: This I shall answer, by boldly and positively asserting, that both fishermen and tradesmen will look upon themselves as peculiarly fortunate to have such conditions offered

offered them. With respect to the impracticability of the people building themselves houses, I can acquaint you, that however poor they may appear to a stranger, it is known nevertheless, that most of them have more or less money out at interest, which they have saved by their annual earnings. The moment a man has collected a small sum, he looks out with eagerness for a little spot of land to lay out his money in stocking it with a few sheep. I know the people would soon build houses with their money, provided they could have leases, with a little land to them. Besides, you would this way ensure to yourselves, respectable and substantial tenants; as no one will apply but who is able to build, which would be no bad sign of a man's industry.

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The second objection which will probably be made, is the impossibility of finding in one place, fifty acres of arable land in the Highlands. Allowing the weight of this objection, I can, however, inform you of a recent instance of a village of fifty houses, not long since established near the Western coast, upon the same principle that I have advanced. There was not at the time the people settled upon it, one acre of cultivation; and in the short space of two years, by mere dint of industry, they built excellent houses, inclosed neat gardens, and improved many acres of most barren and rugged ground; so that it now forms a most pleasing, chearful, and lively scene to the traveller's eye. Have we any reason to imagine the fishermen will be less laborious, when we may suppose, from the hardiness of their constitutions, that they will be able to work abroad in the se-

verest weather, while the inland people are not able to withstand the inclemency of it; and that in the seasons when they cannot fish, they will labour their crofts, and convert every rood of the most unfertile part into rich and well dressed fields? From this instance I am led to conclude, that if you leave the fishermen any sort of land, they will be content; and soon, by their industry, make it good.

The third objection will probably be that no landholder will choose to dispose of any part of his property. Admitting, as I shall most readily do, that some may come under this description, and be so selfish and interested as to refuse to the Society their land; others, within my knowledge, more patriotic and magnanimous, are to be found, who will desire you to name any place of theirs;

theirs, which you think is well situated for a fishing village: and if I may venture to anticipate your noble Governor, whose public patriotism and private virtues echo over that county with a joyful and rebounding sound, you will see him, at this critical period, shortly step forward to request you to choose those places on his most extensive coast, which you consider as proper for villages, and for improving the fisheries; conscious, that he is thereby doing an essential service to his country, his people, his family, and himself.

The last objection I shall take notice of is, that nobody will incline to sell their lands at twenty-five years purchase. The Company, it may be thought, being forced to bargain for

those situations which are recommended to them as having the qualities of fishing towns, must treat with the landholders on unequal and inadequate terms. There are several proprietors now offering their lands to sale, who have situations pointed out as proper for the erection of villages. This gives me room to believe, that they would be glad to treat with the Society for as much land as they may have occasion for. Besides this, tho' I may differ in opinion from a deserving itinerant author, I do think that you need not be tied down to particular spots; for there is almost, in every creek, an excellent harbour to be found, and fish on every shore. From this view of the coast, should one landholder be scrupulous to sell to you his land, you have only to propose your conditions to the
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next; and it will be remarkable indeed, if you cannot bring some of them into your terms. Had I a property any where on the coast, I should exert myself to try to persuade you to purchase a farm from me at twenty-five years purchase; sensible, that though I might reap little benefit at first, from your placing a village upon my estate; yet in a few years, I should be most amply recompensed for the permission. For when the village increased, which must happen, as every fishing village has hitherto done, the people would flock to me for land; and as they could get no other, having no other to get near them, I should fix my own terms, which they could afford to pay; as by that time, by their success in the fisheries, they would have gained money. I make no doubt
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but that many proprietors will concur with me in this opinion, and discern that it will be their interest to agree with the Joint Stock Company. Others more greedy are to be found, who will wish you not to purchase any land, and will put every obstacle in your way to impede you from doing it, as they know, that by your building villages alone, without your having property to grant the fishermen, you will actually build houses for themselves. A Highlander puts no estimation upon a house, unless he can obtain from the landholder the land he needs. As have you none to give him, he must be entirely under the landholder's command, and will not obey your directions respecting the fisheries, but must at all times be ready to serve the person who rents him the land, and look up to him as his master.

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The landholder in return, as is frequently the case, will make the fisherman pay an exorbitant price for his little croft, which will be the means of keeping him poor, throw a damp upon his industry, and prove a total discouragement and detriment to the fisheries. It may, perhaps, be said, that the plan which I have proposed, is exposed to the same objection as the second; to that of feuing out of land. But I shall appeal to any one conversant with the Highlands, if any disadvantage arises from leasing out of land in the manner which at present is followed in many parts. For the people, notwithstanding their leases, are still under great dependancy, as they always look forward to the end of their leases, and take care to behave well towards their landlord, and their neighbours. I shall not trespass any longer upon your time,

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by enlarging upon this plan; the advantages of it being clear and obvious to any mind of the least discernment.

I shall finish by recalling to your memory some particulars regarding the fisheries. I would by no means wish you to launch out upon any extravagant plan. Your funds are very small for the greatness of your enterprise; and this no doubt will make you cautious of sinking money without the greatest prospect or assurance of success. It has been said that you wished for a new Act of Parliament, the present act being not sufficiently extended. I am very much mistaken if your present act does not empower you to purchase land; in which case you cannot desire of it to do more. Perhaps, the magnitude of the enlargement of the fisheries, which certainly comprehends many important national

tional objects, such as the future wealth that will spring from it, which has till now lain dead in the sea; and the number of brave indefatigable subjects it will rescue from sloth, and employ in that manner which Providence seems to have ordered, and who will be ready on the lowest emergency to man his Majesty's fleet, and defend the country against every enemy;—perhaps considerations so momentous may inflame you with an ardent zeal for every improvement that can be wished. These you will find it some time or other incumbent upon you to set about. But should that warm ardor which you, I dare say, at this moment feel, animate you to undertake more than the settlement of the villages at present, you will have reason to lament ever taking your country's cause so much at heart; as it

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must

must mislead you, and prove the bane of your Society, and of course the Fisheries. Purchase land, and let it out upon a building lease. When you have thus collected the people together, they will be content, and live happy in their new possessions. Perhaps it may be necessary to lend them money to aid them to buy nets and boats, &c. but they must get the proprietors in the country to be their security, or assign their houses for that purpose. You should accept of no other. You should, too, give premiums on the tonnage of the fishing vessels, which is preferable to premiums on the greatest quantity of fish caught, as this is subject to many frauds. The large vessels ought unquestionably to be encouraged: they are by far more easily navigated, and require fewer hands. Your capital will allow of premiums, in proportion

portion as it shall encrease by the interest you receive from the land. When you have done all this, you have executed the duties of your offices. Have patience, and the rest of the improvements will follow of themselves, with a rapid step, supported by some little assistance from you. It must take time for the Fisheries to rise to their highest eminence. I should be sorry to see you build keys and wharfs till you have a larger capital. After your villages are built, That might occupy your deliberation. The shores are very convenient in some places for landing the fish: the boats can unload with the greatest facility and safety on the sides of rocks. The great scarcity of salt all along the coast, deserves your attention. It was formerly smuggled from Ireland at a very reasonable price.

The salt comes now all from the Eastern coast; and sometimes it is not to be got for any sum of money. This materially hurts the fishermen, as they must use it in large quantities to cure their fish. I should suppose salt works might be erected in those places which lie nearest to coal. This article, indeed, is extremely scarce all over the country, owing to the duty upon coal and cinders carried coastways, which is felt very severely by the inhabitants, and hurts considerably the fisheries. You, who on every occasion are listened to with great satisfaction by the gentlemen of the House of Commons, should push the matter this session, which would gain you the heartfelt thanks of that part of the country, and great credit from the nation in general. It is universally acknowledged to be a very partial and grievous

vous tax; and, at the same time, it brings little into the revenue. There are many fitter articles for taxation, which might replace it, and would be more productive to the revenue. I would not wish to see you appoint any servants except a secretary. Agents are more ready to mind their own interest than the interest of their country; nor do they think it a crime to impose upon a public Company. You may depend upon the gentlemen and stewards of the great proprietors for information. They are men of probity, and in general of the strictest honour, and will chearfully transact your business.

The Society should never attempt to enter into any branch of the fishing trade. The Dutch began their fisheries by trying

ing it; but having learned from experience the inability and incapacity of any Company's meddling with that trade, they gave it directly up to private adventurers, who have ever since followed it with amazing success, and extraordinary profits.

The smuggling trade, which has been carried on for a considerable length of time by the inhabitants on the Western coast, calls loudly for immediate redress. It has till lately been prosecuted with such spirit, and on such an extensive line, that the contraband goods, particularly the brandy and wines that are landed on the coast, are sent into the most inland part of the Highlands in cart loads, to the no small prejudice and corruption of the morals of the people; they being able to buy
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these articles very cheap, and at their very doors, though perhaps situated in the remotest corner of the country. To this unfortunate circumstance, is attributed one of the causes of the inhabitants neglecting so long the natural advantages of their situation. They, from a mistaken view of the profits, prefer the dishonest, idle, slothful, and debauched life of a smuggler, to the more honest, laborious, healthy, and comfortable life of a fisherman. It will become you to take care, that no smuggler receives admittance into your villages. At the same time, to prevent the villages from smuggling, it might be proper to stipulate in the leases, that should the tenants at any time smuggle, the lease shall be declared void.

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The commutation tax has almost entirely stopped the smuggling of tea, and I am inspired with a hope, that the commercial treaty with France, will stop the smuggling of wines and brandy.

I have now done, and shall beg leave most earnestly to recommend the plan which I have the honour to present you. It will meet with applause; and you may expect by it, from every corner, an ample subscription. There are people who mean to subscribe, but keep themselves back to see whether the measures you adopt, promise success.

F I N I S.

